

THE VINE

Commonwealth Times

Trials and tribulations of the press

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CT STAFF WRITER

The Times of the Times

Serving as the voice for the student body, the Commonwealth Times, Virginia Commonwealth University's student-run newspaper, was established in 1969 after the Richmond Professional Institute merged with the Medical College of Virginia to form VCU in 1968.

The CT was originally The Proscript, RPI's student newspaper (previously known as Atlas), but its name was changed to reflect the new union between RPI and MCV.

Whereas The Proscript "dealt exclusively with campus affairs, the Times ... roamed all over the map, dealing with city, state and national issues," according to Virginius Dabney's "Virginia Commonwealth University: A Sesquicentennial History," which was published in 1987.

Originally a part of the instructional program in RPI's department of journalism, the CT, by mutual consent, separated from the department in 1970 and became an independent publication after it "published some offensive remarks concerning the election of Jim Elam, a black, as president of student government" and because it "was causing a drain on the department's personnel and finances," according to Dabney.

Dabney wrote that the CT, at times, shared a strained relationship with the university's administration. He recorded several periods of time when the paper and the administration did not see eye to eye. One such period occurred in the late 70s when the CT published the salaries of university employees citing "the people's right to know" as their defense.

Another incident involved an "incredibly obscene interview containing virtually nothing but gutter language" entitled "I'm Nasty and They Don't Like It," which former VCU President Edmund F. Ackell regarded with "disappointment and displeasure." During this incident, students occasionally referred to the CT as the "Commonwealth Crimes" or "Punk Rock Rag."

"There have been times of great accord between [the student press and the administration,] but it's also true that the CT shared a powerful adversarial relationship with authority at different periods," said Dr. Richard Wilson, former vice provost for student affairs from 1969-1994. "It wasn't anything out of the ordinary."

"The student press is often at odds with the administration and perhaps they should be. They are the eyes and ears of the student body. They have the right to be assertive and confront the administration about issues that affect the students."

The CT's history hasn't been completely filled with controversy. It also won several awards over the years; among them being named the best college paper in Virginia (1977-1979) and receiving a first place national award at a New York City convention among international college and university newsmagazines (1980).

"There have been some very good years and some lean years," said George Crutchfield, former director of the School

of Mass Communications. "At some points, the paper was looked at as just a forum for opinion. They had the type of attitude where if they missed their deadline, they missed it."

"The students who've worked on the paper are all fine people. It's true that some have produced a better publication, but they all did their job to provide a voice for the students."

Issues of the CT appear in newspaper racks every Monday and Thursday.

The Seeds of The Vine

In 1978, VCU's black community found a voice with the establishment of Reflections in Ink, the student newsmagazine of VCU, by members of the Black Student Alliance and the League of Black Journalists.

According to Dabney, Reflections in Ink focused on issues such as apartheid in South Africa, the inadequate number of black faculty and the small number of blacks in administrative positions at VCU.

He wrote that "the tone of Reflections in Ink [was] less strident than might have been anticipated" and that "its attitude toward the administration [had] been less obnoxious than that exhibited off and on by The Commonwealth Times."

In the fall of 1994, the newsmagazine changed its name to The Vine because Reflections in Ink had a negative reputation around campus due to its erratic publishing schedule in the early 90s and because the name just didn't suit a campus newsmagazine, said Craig Belcher, a former executive editor of The Vine who played a major role in changing Reflections in Ink into The Vine.

After brainstorming for a new name, Belcher and the rest of the staff eventually agreed on The Vine, which they derived from "grapevine."

"The word 'grapevine' is usually associated with gossip—not that The Vine is all about gossip—and the name gave the magazine a kind of edge that Reflections in Ink didn't," said Belcher. "I went through hell getting the name changed."

"I had to get permission from all the leaders of the black student groups because the newspaper belonged to the student body and they had to be in agreement. It was stupid. I had to take care of it during our first weekend of production and our first issue looked terrible because I was caught up in all of that red tape."

The name of the newsmagazine wasn't the only thing that changed in the fall of 1994. The new name was also accompanied by a "change in the vibe of the magazine from an African-American one to a more multicultural one," said Randy L. Gaskin, editor-in-chief of The Vine.

"Of course [The Vine] still has an African-American perspective," he said. "But, we don't want to be looked at as just for African-Americans."

Belcher agreed.

"We wanted to give [students] the total picture of the university by telling stories that weren't being covered by the Commonwealth Times and by providing all students with an alternative voice," he said.

New issues of The Vine can be found in

History of VCU



photos by Rita Botts

Meet the press. (top) VVCW's sports director Travis Milton talks air during his show beginning at 5 p.m. on Wednesdays. (right) collage of newsprint shows past appearances of such campus publications as The Vine and the Commonwealth Times.

newsstands every two weeks.

Trials of the Student Press

It is important for students to understand the importance of student publications' existence and the trials that they have faced, Crutchfield said.

"The student press serves as an information medium," he said. "They show life at the university. They are an outlet for opinion and a forum for creative expression. They provide students with guidance, education and the opportunity to learn about ethical standards in journalism."

Belcher agreed.

"We're here for the students, but I don't think they realize what we go through for them or some of the problems that we face," he said. "Putting together a paper is not easy. It takes a lot of hard work, dedication and sacrifice. You really have to love this job."

Difficulties faced by VCU's student publications, Crutchfield said, have primarily been economic. Student publications do not receive a substantial amount of money despite advertising revenues and the money allocated to them by the Student Media Commission, the university organization that distributes a percentage of student activity fees (23 percent) among the various student media.

The lack of money, he said, among other things (such as the dedication of the staff), can and does affect the frequency of publication or even the size of the publication. For instance, the CT used to publish in "standard format" (the size of the Richmond Times-Dispatch) before it switched to "tabloid format" to cut down on costs. Its publication schedule also varied over the years, fluctuating between three times a week and once a week.

The problem of infrequent publication, Belcher said, would sometimes cause the SMC to step in.

"We're not here to stifle creativity," said L. Victor Collins, director of the office of multicultural student affairs and member of the SMC. "If we give them money to do something and they're not doing it, then it's our responsibility to raise questions and make those types of inquiries as to why they aren't."

According to the SMC's bylaws, it is their duty to "protect the rights of students who are required to subscribe to the student media through payment of the student activity fee."

Collins also said that these types of conversations with the student media were, in fact, pretty rare.

Contrary to popular belief, Wilson said, VCU's administration never posed a threat to the student press in terms of censorship.

In fact, the university's administration, particularly the SMC, supports the CT and The Vine against censorship. According to its bylaws, the SMC works to protect the First Amendment privileges of the student media by "supporting the maximum freedom of expression to all students involved in the student media" and "[affirming] the right of the student media to determine the content of their product. The SMC neither 'supports nor defends any prior reviewing of content by university personnel in an effort to enforce censorship prior to distribution.'"

Occasionally, student publications have come across the danger of potential libel lawsuits that stemmed from "our own carelessness and inaccuracies," said Wilma Wirt, an associate professor in the School of Mass Communications and the CT's faculty adviser.

"We've been lucky, very lucky to have avoided potential lawsuits," she said. "We've been fortunate because we've been able to come through and remedy situations quickly."

One case involving a potential libel suit occurred in 1992 when the CT published a

U student media



Radio provides creative outlet on air

Laura Davis
CT REPORTER

Sitting around your dorm room on snow days is no party. But it can be. How about a little music?

WVCW is VCU's student-run and student-managed radio station. Students can tune in at 640 AM on campus and off campus at 90.5 on Media One Cable Radio.

The station broadcasts seven days a week from 8 a.m. to 1 a.m. and accepts requests, according to its Web site.

WVCW began around the early 1970s in the basement of Millheiser House, according to John S. Geerdes, former WVCW station manager and televisions system engineer.

Back then it was WJRB, which stands for James River Broadcasting, but was later changed to WVCW.

Geerdes was manager from May 1980 to May 1982.

"We tried very hard to stay on top of transmission quality. (We had) a newscast at the top of every hour," he said.

The station's format was New Wave in the early 1980s. Current News Director Mike Liedtke said the station now plays a variety of music, "and that's appropriate because VCU is diverse."

"It's more rock than anything else," he said, but rap, old school hip hop, country and some other genres are played as well.

Working at WVCW has helped Liedtke make contacts at record labels, and it also helps with people skills and public speaking, he said.

Geerdes said, "(WVCW is) a good training ground right now for people who want to get into radio, if run correctly. A lot of students have gone on to work in radio and broadcasting."

He said that when he was manager "the students were dedicated to the student voice, but the voice was limited because it was not over air."

The station does not have an over-the-air broadcast signal, so it has never been geared to be a force for social movement in the university, he added. WVCW is more about entertainment, said Geerdes.

Getting a license poses some problems.

Geerdes said one problem is that the only place on the educational band for the station would interfere with the audio of TV's Channel 6.

Also, consistency and leadership are needed in WVCW to influence the university to hold a license for it, he said. The university, not the station itself, must hold the license, and Geerdes said the school would want some faculty members to be responsible.

"The station's been struggling with (this problem) for 25 years," he said. Because the station has never constantly had reliable leadership, Geerdes said that if he were the university, he would not grant the license.

Even without a license, WVCW continues to entertain. Liedtke said plans are in the making for a concert at Schafer Court. Nationally known performers may include Less than Jake and Cool Keith.

And, listeners can always request a song by calling (804) 828-1061 or (804) 828-1055.



story about the arrest of two VCU athletes charged with grand larceny and breaking and entering. The CT also placed a photograph of one of the two athletes in question alongside the story. Unfortunately, they published a photograph of the wrong athlete.

"We found out about the story pretty close to deadline," said Michael Gorman, a former CT staff writer who wrote the story about the arrest. "We were all in a hurry and didn't thoroughly check everything out. We didn't mean for it to happen, but it did. It was a really bad mistake."

Gorman recalled how the staff moved as quickly as possible to remove the issues that had already been distributed to campus stands. They shredded about 10,000 copies of the issue and, after a meeting, decided to redo page one and correct the mistake.

"I was pretty scared," he said. "If we hadn't realized what had happened, the consequences could have been severe. Most of the time, this type of mistake doesn't happen, but it definitely was a good learning experience on how easily [libel] can happen. It's good to remember that it's other people's reputations that are affected when we make a mistake."

In terms of actual court cases, the number of libel suits filed against college publi-

cations is relatively low, said Mark Goodman, executive director of the Student Press Law Center in Arlington, Va.

"I think college journalists are generally careful because they're new, so they tend to be fairly cautious" he said. "Libel suits are very hard to win in any case so they're pretty rare."

Wirt said that people have to remember that the staff of campus publications is comprised of students and that errors are never intentional.

"Even the most well-qualified students will truly believe they understand a situation that is newsworthy," she said. "And in their excitement and eagerness to get the story in print as quickly as possible, they make errors."

"We all make mistakes. It's all a learning process and the administration has been very supportive through it."

Wilson agreed.

"The student media needs to be promoted by the administration," he said. "They're as important as anything else in the student community, if not more so."

"Journalism plays a pivotal role in society—a free press is critical to democracy and an active, alive, curious and truth-seeking student press carries the heavy responsibility of delivering the news and promoting discourse."

WVCW

on campus -- 640 AM
off campus -- 90.5 FM